

Good morning, Chairman Crawford and members of the Committee. My name is David Shipper. I am the operator of 28 cemeteries in Michigan with over 400,000 lot owners serving over 8,000 families experiencing deaths each year. I am also past President of The International Cemetery Cremation and Funeral Association with 6,000 member firms in 23 countries.

The proposed Reclamation Act under consideration will provide a vital tool to help the struggling cemetery industry in Michigan.

The land that cemeteries own provides their main source of future income. When that land is depleted, the cemetery has no way to generate income except through service fees and income earned from its perpetual care fund. And as more and more people turn toward cremation, the number of burials, and the corresponding service fees are dwindling as most cemeteries know as well.

The proposed Reclamation Act under consideration can help address this issue. Let me explain how.

Decades ago, it was quite common for a single family to buy 4, 8, or 12 burial spaces seeking to establish a family burial estate. Population shifts out of urban areas and a much more transient society have left a great number of those graves empty. Remaining family members, quite simply, have moved away.

This is very common in some of our most beautiful urban cemeteries across the country. Right here at home, as an example, we own 4 cemeteries in Detroit. Two of those, Woodlawn and Grandlawn, have been landmarks for a century or more. But both are severely limited in the amount of remaining burial space available. Let's take Woodlawn as an example.

Many titans of industry are buried here, including prominent members of the Ford family, the Dodge family, the Kresge family, and the Hudson family. From the world of music, Aretha Franklin's family estate is here as are Diana Ross's family, the Winan family, and Berry Gordy's family. Prominent members of the original Spinners, the 4 Tops, Gladys Knight and the Pips, the Temptations, and the Funk Brothers are interred here, as is rap icon Deshaun "Proof" Holton. Many well known Detroit Tiger players are here. So is Mayor Albert E. Cobo for whom the Cobo center is named. Geraldine Ford, the first African American federal judge appointed in the United States, is buried here. Perhaps most significantly in recent years, civil rights hero Rosa Parks was entombed at Woodlawn in the Rosa Parks Chapel in 2005.

In essence, Woodlawn and Grandlawn preserve the heritage of Detroit in a way that no other institution can. And their very presence encourages new generations to think about their own heritage in a way that a suburban or distant cemetery could never provide.

Without sufficient grave space, however, these cemeteries cannot generate enough revenue to pay for the maintenance these cemeteries deserve. Without the sale of plots, we cannot fund our trusts. Without the sale of plots, service revenue, already declining, will decline even further. Basically, these cemeteries will experience declining quality of maintenance without the revenue necessary to maintain the facility.

The lowest impact, business based solution to this dilemma is to adopt a Reclamation Act like the one under consideration.

The occasion of hearing from a family after 60 years of absolutely no activity is almost unheard of. The actual occurrence of having to substitute another grave space will be an extremely rare event, if it ever occurs at all.

In our view, having access to burial spaces that will otherwise never be used is a well-known and accepted way to financially support institutions that can remain economically vital with this opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to present this issue to you for your thoughtful consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you might have. And if the response requires an attorney's insight, I have with me Mr. Steve Liedel of the Dykema firm who can answer your questions.

Again, my thanks.

David Shipper

President, Midwest Memorial Group